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THE "GITANJALI": OR SONG-OFFERINGS OF RABINDRA NATH TAGORE

BY MAY SINCLAIR

"But what are they all about?" a friend asked me when I tried to tell him of the "Gitanjali" of Rabindra Nath Tagore.

"They are all about the passion of the love of God," I said.

"Oh, devotional poetry. There is nothing easier to write than devotional poetry," said my friend.

I wondered, is he thinking of "Hymns Ancient and Modern," of the "Olney Hymns," and of "The Christian Year"?

In any event he had raised between us such an alienating vision of the banalities and facilities in which our unhappy youth was nursed that I forgot to remind him of the Psalms of David. And it was altogether impossible to speak of the "Gitanjali," the "Song-offerings" of Rabindra Nath Tagore.

It was not many weeks since I had heard these poems for the first time, that evening when Mr. Yeats turned Mr. Rothenstein's drawing-room into a holy temple by reading a dozen or more of them to about a dozen people. Even now, though they would all of course agree that what had happened was, for Literature, an event of supreme importance, they are probably no nearer than I am to knowing precisely what it was that happened to *them*. The thing was an experience too subtle, too profound, and too personal to be readily translatable into language. And so it would have been impossible to write about it in any words that would hang together if my friend had not supplied that slender thread.

For deep-seated in his mind was the conviction that de-

votional poetry is not and cannot be pure poetry; a view which might be plausible enough if you had nothing but the " Olney Hymns " or " The Christian Year " to compare with, say, the choruses in " Prometheus Unbound " or " Atalanta in Calydon."

You may go farther. You may take Newman's " Lead, Kindly Light," which is devotional poetry (of the kind my friend was thinking about) at its finest. It is poignant; it is passionate; it expresses in language which is profoundly disturbing the supreme need and longing of the human heart. But set it beside pure poetry at its purest, beside Shelley's " Life of Life, Thy Lips Enkindle," or Swinburne's " The Hounds of Spring are on Winter's Traces," and you see at once that if " Lead, Kindly Light " is poetry it is not altogether pure. It follows a certain devotional tradition. It calls upon emotions long and intimately associated with certain images. You cannot be quite sure that its poignancy does not depend somewhat on associations and accessories, on the voices of the choir, the organ music, and the light fading on a summer evening from stained-glass windows. Shelley's and Swinburne's songs are so pure from all association and so nakedly radiant that they evoke no image but the movement of light itself or of the shining feet of Artemis; they move us by their own subtle and intense vibration or they move us not at all. They have not the power that Newman's hymn has to touch the common human heart.

In the Bengali poems of Rabindra Nath Tagore you will find that common emotional appeal united, in a music and a rhythm many degrees finer than Swinburne's—a music and rhythm almost inconceivable to Western ears—with the metaphysical quality, the peculiar subtlety and intensity of Shelley; and that with a simplicity that makes this miracle appear the most natural thing in the world. As far as I know no Western poet yet born has done precisely this. Not Milton; he is far too grandiose for the human heart. Not Wordsworth; he is at once too subtle and too ponderous. And not the great mystic poets of the West, for they are the poets of mystics, as Shelley is the poet of poets; not Crashaw and not Francis Thompson, nor Henry Vaughn nor Blake at his simplest. Not even Dante and St. John of the Cross, though they stand nearest (they are very near) to this great mystic poet of Bengal. For the songs

of the "Gitanjali," the purest of pure poetry, written in the Bengali vernacular, are sung all over his native province; they are sung in the churches of the Brama Somaj. You cannot sing any of those great mystic poems of the West in church. And if you could they would not be understood by the congregation.

To the Western mind there is a gulf fixed between the common human heart and Transcendent Being. That is partly why, with the exception of the works of the great mystics and the seers, the devotional poetry of the West (Catholic and Protestant alike) is so unsatisfying. Most of it is written by people who are not poets. But the worst of it is that it is not supremely devotional. It does not deal directly with the Transcendent, but proceeds, fervently indeed; but always by way of dogma and tradition, as it were by perpetual makeshifts, and through the most horrible tangle of material and carnal imagery, to a visionary Throne of Grace. You never seem to arrive. Your heart may be soothed by the assurance of atonement; but your finer metaphysical hunger is left forever unappeased. And your poetic sense receives at every turn the impression entertained by my friend that devotional poetry is not difficult to write.

But take these songs of Divine Love from the "Gitanjali":

> "Art thou abroad on this stormy night on thy journey of love, my friend? The sky groans like one in despair.
>
> "I have no sleep to-night. Ever and ever again I open my door and look out on the darkness, my friend!
>
> "I can see nothing before me. I wonder where lies thy path!
>
> "By what dim shore of the ink-black river, by what far edge of the frowning forest, through what mazy depth of gloom art thou threading thy course to come to me, my friend?"

> "In the deep shadows of the rainy July, with secret steps, thou walkest, silent as night, eluding all watchers.
>
> "To-day the morning has closed its eyes, heedless of the insistent calls of the loud east wind, and a thick veil has been drawn over the ever-wakeful blue sky.
>
> "The woodlands have hushed their songs, and doors are all shut at every house. Thou art the solitary wayfarer in this deserted street. Oh, my only friend, my best beloved, the gates are open in my house—do not pass by like a dream."

> "The day is no more, the shadow is upon the earth. It is time that I go to the stream to fill my pitcher.

"The evening air is eager with the sad music of the water.

"Ah, it calls me out into the dusk. In the lonely lane there is no passer-by, the wind is up, the ripples are rampant in the river.

"I know not if I shall come back home. I know not whom I shall chance to meet. There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute."

"I was not aware of the moment when I first crossed the threshold of this life.

"What was the power that made me open out into this vast mystery like a bud in the forest at midnight!

"When in the morning I looked upon the light I felt in a moment that I was no stranger in this world, that the inscrutable without name and form had taken me in its arms in the form of my own mother.

"Even so, in death the same unknown will appear as ever known to me. And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well.

"The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation."

With what supreme simplicity the Bengali poet bridges the great gulf!

His simplicity, his restraint, his austerity, will be a little disconcerting to those who are accustomed to think of Oriental poetry as a thing of ungovernable efflorescence, smothered in decoration, crusted with gold and jewels, and specially and disgustingly rich in sensual imagery.

But as the East is subtler than the West, and as of all Eastern races the Bengali is the subtlest, so an extreme subtlety of feeling and of rhythm is the first quality that strikes you in the songs of this Bengali poet. This will damn them in the mind and to the ear of every Westerner who measures feeling by blood pressure and rhythm by the strokes of a sledge-hammer. To the average European, subtlety is a synonym for intricacy and obscurity, for the refinements of chicane, and for a certain insinuating sensual charm. The European writer, when he is subtle, is frequently sensual where he is not intricate and obscure, while the subtlety of the Eastern poet makes for transparence and simplicity. And a supreme transparence and simplicity is what you will find in every line of Rabindra Nath Tagore. It is the simplicity, the transparence of dew and crystal and still water. As a mystic he is bound to be a symbolist. But his phrase, his rhythm, is infallibly the most perfect,

the most crystalline medium of his symbol, his symbol the most crystalline and perfect medium of his thought. The result is an incomparable unity of rhythm and language, of language and idea.

It is not the least of his marvelous achievements that he should have preserved this quality in his translations. In his own language he had an absolutely flawless medium. "Bengali," says Mr. F. H. Skrine, "unites the mellifluousness of Italian with the power possessed by German of rendering complex ideas." English most certainly does not, but Mr. Tagore has almost persuaded it. I am told by those who know these poems in the original that this prose rendering, apparently so unerring in its sense of phrasing, of sound values and vibrations, fails to give the slenderest, most shadowy idea of the beauty of the Bengali, its richness of association, its diaphanous texture, its glamour and its musical quality, the plasticity, the subtlety, the variety of its rhythms. I have heard some of the songs of the "Gitanjali" sung and recited by the poet himself and by others. At the first hearing the rhythms, the pitch, were strange, almost unseizable by Western ears; sounds tenuous and remote and disconnected like the buzzing song of a swarm of gnats. On the second and the third hearing their music and their magic was apparent.

Though this strange music is lost to us, Mr. Tagore's translation preserves, not only all that is essential and eternal in his poetry, but much of the strange magic. Indeed, the substance of it is of such supreme value and vitality that no translation could have killed it. Like the poetry of his own Vedas and Upanishads, it would have survived even the glamourless rendering of a scholar. Above all, its simplicity and its transparency survive; for they are of the substance of this poet's vision. The whole complexity of things, the veil of *Maya,* the illusion of the world, is simple and translucent to him, so simple and so translucent that Reality is neither hidden by it nor obscured. That wearing of the veil of illusion is the jest of the Divine Lover hiding himself from his beloved that he may be the more passionately desired.

> "It is he who weaves the web of this *maya* in evanescent hues of gold and silver, blue and green, and lets peep out through the folds his feet, at whose touch I forget myself.
>
> "Days come and ages pass, and it is ever he who moves in my

heart in many a name, in many a guise, in many a rapture of joy and of sorrow."

And in the poems of this mystic the world appears no longer in its brutality, its vehemence, its swift yet dense fluidity; it is seized in the very moment of its passing and fixed in the clarity and stillness of his vision. It is always the same every-day world, the dusty road, the deserted street, the solitary fording, "the bank in the shady lane" where "the yellow leaves flutter and fall." "In the deep shadows of the rainy July thou walkest, with secret step, eluding all watchers." At the coming of the Unknown Traveler "The leaves rustled overhead; the cuckoo sang from the unseen dark, and perfume of *babla* flowers came from the end of the road." A world vivid to every sense, yet the stage of a supersensual drama, the scene of the divine adventure. So vivid and so actual is it, that only its strange fixity stirs in you the thrill of the supersensual. And through this fixity, this stillness of rhythm and of mood, there is a mysterious trouble and excitement, an awful tension of expectancy. It is the stillness of intense vibration, of life inconceivably living, the ecstasy of supreme passion consummated and consumed.

No. There is nothing in the Western world to compare with these poems but the writings of those mystics who were also saints: St. Augustine, St. Thomas à Kempis, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Julian of Norwich,[1] St. Catherine of Genoa,[2] St. Teresa; and, above all, St. John of the Cross in "The Dark Night of the Soul":

"Upon my flowery breast,
Wholly for Him and save himself for none,
There did I give sweet rest
To my beloved one;
The banners of the cedars breathed thereon!"

All these impassioned lovers of the Godhead use the same language, telling of the same unique experience; and it is invariably the language of human passion, for the simple

[1] "Till I be substantially oned to Him I may never have full rest nor very bliss: that is to say, till I be so fastened to Him, that there is right nought that is made between my God and me."—*Revelations of Divine Love.*

[2] "My *Me* is God, nor do I recognize any other *Me,* except my God Himself."—*Vita.*

and sufficient reason that there is no other.[1] At the same time, with the exception of Dante's *Paradiso* and *Vita Nuova,* it would be hard to find in all the poetry of Western mysticism a perfect parallel to the passion of the "Gitanjali." There are few Western mystics who do not somewhere betray the restlessness that lies around their rest. Until the final attainment of the Unitive Life their peace would seem to have been harder won, to be held more perilously, to be always on the point of passing, so vivid is the sense they give of effort, of struggle, of frantic desperation. There is a corresponding vehemence and violence in their language. St. Teresa says of the state of the enraptured soul: "No consolation reaches it from heaven, and it is not there itself; it wishes for none from earth, and it is not there either; but it is, as it were, crucified between earth and heaven, enduring its passion." Again she speaks of "the great shocks I used to feel when our Lord would throw me into these trances." And again:

> "It is like a person, who having a rope round his neck tries to breathe." "On other occasions the soul seems to be in the utmost extremity of need, asking itself and saying, 'Where is Thy God?'" "I saw myself dying with a desire to see God, and I knew not how to seek that life otherwise than by dying. Certain great impetuosities of love, though not so intolerable as those of which I have spoken before . . . overwhelmed me." "This prayer is like the sobbing of little children, who seem on the point of choking and whose disordered senses are soothed by giving them to drink." "Some slight mitigation may be had, and the pain may pass away for a little, by praying God to relieve its sufferings; but the soul sees no relief except in death by which it hopes to attain the fruition of its good. At other times these impetuosities are so violent the soul can do neither this nor anything else; the whole body is contracted, and neither hand nor foot can be moved; if the body be upright at the time it falls down, as a thing that has no control over itself. It cannot even breathe; all it does is to moan—not loudly, because it cannot; its moaning, however, comes from a keen sense of pain."

Again, an angel appears to her in a vision.

> "I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God."

[1] "As a young man yearns for his beloved, even so the soul yearns for God; it is for want of a better object of comparison that the Vaishnavists worship the Lord under this form."—*Chaitanya Devi.*

Of St. Catherine of Genoa it is said that "at times she would seem to have her mind in a mill; and as if this mill were indeed grinding her soul and body."

> "She would at times, when in the garden, seize hold of the thorn-covered twigs of the rose-bushes with both her hands; and would not feel any pain while thus doing it in a transport of mind. She would also bite her hands and burn them, and this in order to divert, if possible, her interior oppression."[1]

St. John of the Cross speaks of "an intense and amorous impetus," answering to St. Teresa's "impetuosities."

And at times the language of the Catholic mystic is the language of sensuous, almost of sensual, emotion, so voluptuous that it must be confessed it lends itself to the misinterpretation of the profane. Mr. Tagore has none of these ambiguities. It is impossible to doubt the spirituality of these songs of Divine Love. They are at the very highest level of attainment in their kind. They have the serenity and purity of supreme possession. Mystic passion embraces while it transcends the whole range of human passion. Like human passion it works through body, heart, and soul. It is the soul and heart of passion that you find in the "Gitanjali," its secret and invisible things, small and great, all in it that is superb, inviolate, undying; all that is lowly, and most fragile; its impalpable, incommunicable moods, its evanescences, its dreams, its subtleties, its reticences and courtesies; its fears and delicate shames.

> "I asked nothing from thee; I uttered not my name to thine ear. When thou took'st thy leave I stood silent. I was alone by the well where the shadow of the tree fell aslant, and the women had gone home with their brown earthen pitchers full to the brim. . . . I heard not thy steps as thou camest. Thine eyes were sad as they fell on me; thy voice was tired as thou spokest low, 'Ah, I am a thirsty traveler.' I started up from my day-dreams and poured water from my jar on thy joined palms. . . . I stood speechless with shame when my name thou didst ask. Indeed, what had I done for thee to keep me in remembrance?"

And again:

> "Where dost thou stand behind them all, my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows? They push thee and pass thee by on the dusty road, taking thee for naught. I wait here weary hours, spreading my offerings for thee, while passers-by come and take my flowers, one by one, and my basket is nearly empty. . . . Men going home glance at me and smile and fill me with shame. I sit like a beggar maid, drawing my skirt over my face, and when they ask me what it is I want, I drop my eyes and answer them not."

[1] *Life of St. Catherine of Genoa.* By Baron von Hutten.

There is no querulousness and no grossness of impatience, no restlessness in this passion of the expectant soul.

And on the part of the pursuing God there are none of those impetuosities that overwhelmed St. Teresa. He comes "with silent steps." He is the lover waiting in the shadows. He is the watcher by the bed, the solitary wayfarer in the deserted street, the traveler at the well; he is Krishna, the lute-player, the "unknown man" playing in the little boat at the fording. I know nothing so persuasive as the glamour of this Eastern stillness, nothing that evokes so irresistibly, so inevitably the sense of the Unseen. You will find it in its perfection in the sixty-seventh song of the "Gitanjali."

> "Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.
>
> "O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that incloses the soul with colors and sounds and odors.
>
> "There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.
>
> "And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.
>
> "But there, where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance. There is no day nor night, nor form nor color, and never, never a word."

Before this supreme austerity and restraint all foregoing comparisons break down. There is, through all their likeness, an unmistakable difference between those great Western mystics and Rabindra Nath Tagore.

Their passion utters a more poignant lyrical cry. They experience a more violent rapture in union, and a deeper tragedy in separation. Nothing could well be farther from his spirit than their emotionalism. Individual temperament has no doubt something to do with it, but it is not the whole secret. This tumult and tragic pain of theirs has its own law. It displays itself in proportion to their asceticism, to the violence of their rupture with the divine visible world. It is the outcome of the dualism inherent in Christianity.

To the devotee of a Creator inconceivably different, infinitely remote and separate from his creation, the visible world is necessarily undivine, abhorrent, and unholy. In renouncing the world the Eastern ascetic denies its exist-

ence. But the Christian, in the very act of renunciation, affirms its shocking independent entity. Thus his deliverance is never either physically or metaphysically complete. That is the Christian's tragedy. He cannot without an agonizing struggle get rid of the world that weighs on him, whereas it is comparatively easy for the Oriental to divest himself, as it were, of his cosmic clothing. It is doubtful if any Eastern ascetic, Brahman or Buddhist, could feel the same furious hatred and horror of the world, seeing that to him the world, the whole visible universe, is at its worst no more than an illusion. You may refuse to become attached to an illusion, you may withdraw from it with every circumstance of profound repudiation, but you cannot furiously hate and abhor a thing which, for you, has no real existence of its own.

In the " Gitanjali " you will find none of this hatred and abhorrence, none, either, of this serene indifference and denial.

> "Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. . . . I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight."

" What divine drink," he cries, " wouldst thou have, my God, from the overflowing cup of my life?" And again:

> "The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
>
> "It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers."

" Is it beyond thee," he asks, " to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm, to be tossed and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?" To him the life of God is an " abounding joy that scatters and gives up and dies every moment." It is the life of humanity as human:

> "Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest and lowliest and lost.
>
> "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee.
>
> "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is making roads. He is with them in sun and in shower and his garment is covered with dust. Put off

> thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil. . . . Our master has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all forever."

Everywhere in these poems there is this acceptance of humanity, this ecstasy of joy in movement and in beauty, this adoration of life.

> "Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song—the joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass, the joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world, the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word."

It looks at first sight as if this all-embracing mysticism were different in its very nature from the view of the Catholic recluse prisoned in his cell. And yet it has even less affinity with Indian mysticism of the Pantheistic type. And this is a little disconcerting. Surely, you say, there must be things in the Upanishads from which some at least of these poems are descended? You take down your Upanishads and hunt through them excitedly for those things, but in vain; unless you are prepared to accept wholesale the interpretations of the ingenious Ramanuja[1] who contended that even in union with Brahman the individual self maintained its separate identity. And it is only now and again in the " Gitanjali " that there comes any reverberation of the mystic words " Tat tvam asi " (" Thou art it ") of those resonant and resplendent passages which proclaim the absolute, inseparable unity of all things, of all selves in the Great Self.

Everybody whom the magic of the Upanishads has delivered from the tyranny of German transcendentalism must feel for them something of that tender adoration which Schopenhauer expressed when he said the study of them had been the solace of his life and would be the solace of his death. They certainly satisfy, as nothing else (not even the Hegelian Dialectic) satisfies that appetite for meta-

[1] The point raised is not whether Ramanuja was wrong in his doctrine, but whether he was right in his interpretation of his texts. Certainly, if Max Müller has translated them correctly (with the possible exception of an ambiguous passage in the Katha Upanishad), they generally seem to be saying the exact opposite of what Ramanuja wants them to say.

physical unity which was so profoundly repellent to the instinct of Mr. William James; and I can imagine that people possessed by that appetite will be disappointed when they find that they cannot label Mr. Tagore " Pantheist " or " Buddhist " and have done with him. And when he tells them that " all ages pass with the hiding and seeking of thee and me," they will resent it almost as if no Oriental had any right to insist on a personal relation involving a breach of identity between the soul and God.

Now, the metaphysician may deny or affirm that identity as his appetite or his instinct prompts him. Nothing can be more certain than that, for the mystic, the personal relation is everything. It is an experience, a fact. All the same, it and the separation it implies, is an experience, a fact, that begins and ends in his own individual consciousness. It is irreducible, indescribable, incommunicable. Metaphysically it stands for nothing more or less than that moment in which the human soul becomes conscious of itself in God. The thing is duplex only in one aspect. Around it, continuing in it and transcending it are all the unity, all the identity you can desire. The separation is not real, not absolute, any more than death or birth is; it is part of the illusion, part of the great game, " the hiding and seeking of thee and me."

> "It is the pang of separation that spreads throughout the world and gives birth to shapes innumerable in the infinite sky.
>
> "It is this sorrow of separation that gazes in silence all night from star to star and becomes lyric among rustling leaves in rainy darkness of July.
>
> "It is this overspreading pain that deepens into loves and desires, into sufferings and joys in human homes, and this it is that ever melts and flows in song through my poet's heart."

To find Mr. Tagore's true sources and affinities you must go back, first of all, to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; to Kabir the mystic; to the great Vaishnavists who were the Humanists of India; to Chandidas the poet; to Chaitanya Devi, the God-intoxicated saint and seer. All of them are said to have been influenced by the Christianity that found its way into Central India in their time. Before them there is Ramanuja. But going back further still, as far back as you *can* go, you find this naïf personal attitude in the Vedic Hymns. The ancient Rishis, as lamentably as any Christian, felt their " self " to be separated from their

deity or deities by the fact of sin. It was those who came after them, the more philosophic Rishis of the Upanishads, the Buddhists who came after *them,* and the expert metaphysicians of the Vedânta, who reversed this view and found sin in the illusion of separation. And all the later mystic poetry of India, from Kabir onward, springs from the conflict and reconciliation between that immemorial feeling of separation and that profound and supersensual certainty of oneness. This indeed is the source of all the mysticism that ever was; only in India the feeling of separation is the baffling thing; the supersensual certainty is taken for granted, while in Christianity it is all the other way. In India it is simply a question of whether you are going to agree, say, with Ramanuja that the individual soul preserves its identity in union, or with Sankaracharya that it has never had any identity to lose.

Kabir, conscious of the separation, conceives union as a mingling in which the soul is certainly not lost. "The soul (âtma) and the Great Soul (Param Âtma) for many ages remained apart; the true Guru (teacher) came as a dealer (*dallah,* middle-man) and made of them a beauteous mixture." "The power that cannot be described, the form that imparts life, whoever becomes one with him (as milk with water) that man, says Kabir to Dharm Dass, Kâli cannot destroy." "Thou art the ocean; I am the fish of the water": he says, "I dwell in the water, without the water I am done for." But he does not say he is a dewdrop and that he slips into the shining sea. And though he protests "Whatever I did, you did; I did nothing myself; should men say I did it, it was in your strength that it was done," he makes it clear that he preserves his separate identity all the same.

In the Vaishnavists[1] this feeling for the individual soul is strong, and in Vaishnava literature it comes into its own.

Chandidas broke with tradition and showed how thorough-paced a Humanist he was when he called his beloved, Rami, the washerwoman, "Holy as the Gayatri," the Sacred Hymn of the Brahmans which is the holiest of all things. He is the poet of the Indian *Divina Commedia* in which the love of Krishna and Radha symbolizes the love of God and the soul.

[1] Worshipers of Vishnu, the Preserver, the Life Force.

This love runs through all the phases of human passion, its dawn, its utterance, its secret tryst, its meeting, its parting, its final union.[1]

> "Dark is the night and thick are the clouds,"

says Radha, the milkmaid.

> "How could you, my beloved, come by the path in such a night?
> There in the garden, I see him standing in the rain;
> My heart breaks at the sight thereof."

And again:

> "Thou art the lord of the Universe, O Krishna, adored by the Yogis.
> "I am but a poor milkmaid and know not how to worship thee!
> "Yet do I offer myself, my soul and my body, unto thee as the sacrifice of love.
> "Thou art my lord, thou art my path, my mind seeks not for any other object.
> "The world scorns me because of this love, yet do I not regret it.
> "Abuse is like a garland of flowers about my neck for thy dear sake.
> "Thou alone knowest whether I am pure or impure.
> "Virtue and vice, says Chandidas, are alike to me. I know them not, but know thy feet alone."[2]

Allowing for the fact that we are comparing an accomplished but uninspired translation with a poetic one, it is evident that Mr. Tagore can trace some of his spiritual ancestry to Chandidas.

And of Chaitanya Devi, the "divine man," it is written:[3]

> "When the God-vision possessed him he yielded to the fine frenzy of a poet and a lover. Whenever he would see the Kadamva flower blooming into beauty, freshened by the rains, he would fall into a trance, remembering that it was the favorite of Krishna. It was a beautiful sight to see him in fits of ecstasy. The tamal-tree, with its dark-blue foliage" (Krishna's complexion was dark blue) "created an illusion in him and he ran to embrace it."

[1] Mr. Dinesh Chandra Sen tells us that this is a form common to all the love-songs of the Vaishnava poets.—*History of Bengali Literature*, p. 123. Again "in Bhaktiratnakara we have 360 different kinds of the finer emotions of the lover's heart minutely classified" (!).—[2] *Ibid.*, p. 543.

[3] Translated by Mr. Dineash Chandra Sen: *History of Bengali Literature.*

In fact, all these Vaishnava poets were in love, as Mr. Tagore is, with the world, with visible beauty as the living body of God. And they know the same rapture in abasement. In the songs of the later Vaishnavists Radha sings:

"Take my bracelet away, O maids, the service of Krishna will adorn my hands, and I want no other ornaments for them;—take away my necklace of purest pearls, the thought of Krishna is the ornament of my breast; I want no other for it; the praise of Krishna will adorn my ears, no need of earrings for them. The ground trodden by Krishna's feet is dear to me; cover my body, O maidens, with the sacred dust of that ground."[1]

And the poet Govinda Das makes Radha say:

"Let my body after death be reduced to the earth of those paths which will be touched by the beautiful feet of Krishna. Let it be melted into the water of the tank where Krishna bathes. When I have expired, let my spirit live as the luster of the mirror in which Krishna sees his face."[1]

And so on.

These passages at least show the sort of tradition that Mr. Tagore has behind him.

And this literature has still its hold upon the common heart of the people of Bengal. Again Mr. Dineash Chandra Sen tells[1] how once in Tippera he heard an illiterate Vaishnava devotee, an old man of seventy, singing that song of Chandidas which I have just quoted, "Dark is the night," and "playing on a lute made of a long gourd."

"While the old man was singing, I suddenly heard his voice become choked with tears, and he could not proceed any more. On his coming to himself after this display of feeling, I asked him the cause of his tears. He said it was the song. The song, I said, described an ordinary love-affair, and where could be the pathos in it that gave occasion for such an outburst of feeling in an old man?

"He explained to me that he did not consider it an ordinary love-song. Here is his interpretation:

"'I am full of sins. My soul is covered with darkness. In deep distress I beckoned to Him to come to me. The merciful God came. I found him waiting for me at the gate of my house. . . .'"

Mr. Chandra Sen left him playing on his lute, weeping and crooning again and again, "Dark is the night." It is as

[1] Translated by Mr. Dineash Chandra Sen: *History of Bengali Literature.*

if a rank-and-filer of the Salvation Army should be found singing and weeping over, not " Lead, Kindly Light," but St. John of the Cross: " The Dark Night of the Soul."

No wonder that Mr. Tagore appeals so strongly to the common heart of his people and that his songs are sung and *understood* in the villages of his province as well as in the churches of the Brama Somaj.

You would have said that with this long tradition behind him, with " three hundred and sixty different kinds of the finer emotions of a lover's heart minutely classified " by his predecessors it would be hopeless for a modern poet to find new language and new moods for their age-worn passion. But here again the love of God and the soul is exceedingly like the love of man and woman. Like human love it is a passion that the ages cannot wear, that is always startlingly new, divinely young, always a unique experience to the lover. And it is just because Mr. Tagore is a modern, a very modern poet that he brings to it such magic and such a marvelous variety of mood. He is himself too various to be bound by one tradition; and when he chooses he will sing of the utter absorption and extinction of the soul as gladly as he sang its triumphant nuptial-song. It is all in keeping. Even so, human passion desires utter extinction in the beloved.

> "I am like a remnant of cloud of autumn uselessly roaming in the sky, O my sun everlasting! Thy touch has not yet melted my vapor, making me one with thy light, and thus I count months and years separated from thee.
>
> "If it be thy wish and if this be thy play, then take this fleeting emptiness of mine, paint it with colors, gild it with gold, float it on the wanton wind and spread it in varied wonders.
>
> "And again, when it shall be thy wish to end this play at night, I shall melt and vanish away in the dark, as it may be in a smile of the white morning, in a coolness of purity transparent."

Here the self appears unmistakably as part of the illusion which is the play of Love.

Again he says:

> "I will deck thee with trophies, garlands of my defeat. It is never in my power to escape unconquered. . . .
>
> "From the blue sky an eye shall gaze down upon me and summon me in silence. Nothing will be left for me, nothing whatever, and utter death shall I receive at thy feet."

This mystic love knows all the sharp contrasts and an-

titheses of passion; there is sternness and terror in its softness, and in its uttermost abasement a savage pride.

> "I thought I should ask of thee—but I dared not—the rose wreath thou hadst on thy neck. Thus I waited for the morning, when thou didst depart, to find a few fragments on the bed. And like a beggar I searched in the dawn only for a stray petal or two.
> "Ah me, what is it I find? What token left of thy love? It is no flower, no spices, no vase of perfumed water. It is thy mighty sword, flashing as a flame, heavy as a bolt of thunder. The young light of morning comes through the window and spreads itself upon thy bed. The morning bird twitters and asks, 'Woman, what hast thou got?' No, it is no flower, nor spices, nor vase of perfumed water—it is thy dreadful sword."

In his very austerity, his stoicism, there is the tenderness, the subtleness, the grace of the Vaishnavist, the adorer of life.

He has passages that recall Walt Whitman (that robust and boisterous Vaishnavist of the Western West) without his boisterousness. Like Whitman's his adoration of life is not greater than his adoration of death. "Because I love this life I know that I shall love death as well."

> "O thou the last fulfilment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me! Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the pangs and joys of life."

And again:

> "When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.
> "I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus am I blessed—let this be my parting word.
> "In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play and here have I caught sight of him that is formless.
> "My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come—let this be my parting word."

It is Whitman of the "Whispers of Heavenly Death," a Whitman exquisitely finished; chastened, refined out of all knowledge.

And these songs of the "Gitanjali" show only one side of him. He has written I do not know how many plays, tales, novels, prose essays, and innumerable love-songs, purely secular. There are songs of children which are in-

cluded in the " Gitanjali," because they are not really secular at all.

> "When I bring to you colored toys, my child, I understand why there is such a play of colors on clouds, on water, and why flowers are painted in tints—when I give colored toys to you, my child.
>
> . . . .
>
> "When I bring sweet things to your greedy hands I know why there is honey in the cup of the flower and why fruits are secretly filled with sweet juice—when I bring sweet things to your greedy hands.
>
> "When I kiss your face to make you smile, my darling, I surely understood what the pleasure is that streams from the sky in morning light, and what delight that is which the summer breeze brings to my body—when I kiss you to make you smile."

I should not have said that these song-offerings are " one side " of him. They are, rather, the outcome of his ultimate vision, the crown that he has set upon his life, his final sacrifice to the Unseen.

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